

ADS Dahlia University - Preparing for a Dahlia Garden

Choose a sunny location for your dahlia garden. Full sun is best unless you live where the summers are hot, perhaps then you will want to avoid the afternoon sun. Aim for at least 6 hours of sun.

You'll have to consider whether you want to till or just turn over the soil. Many gardeners are no longer tilling. These gardeners say no-till maintains the structure of the soil, and doesn't disturb the micro-organisms in the soil, the worms, or, the mycorrhizal fungi networks.

Dahlias prefer slightly acidic soil (6.5). Ideally you will have your soil tested by a laboratory for pH and other characteristics. Check with your extension service and local gardening enthusiasts for labs in your area. There are also at home kits for testing pH which will give you some guidance. Lab tests are, however much more thorough and informative. Once you know the characteristics of your garden soil, you will want to amend accordingly. Solicit advice from your local nurseries, growers in your area, and your own research to determine amendments appropriate for your situation. When using commercial products, always follow instructions carefully.

Some dahlia growers suggest putting some fertilizer in the soil about a month before planting. Try an evenly balanced fertilizer unless your soil test indicates otherwise.

Enhance your soil with organic material – such as compost, leaf humus, oak leaves, peat moss, well-rotted manure, rice and other hulls, mushroom compost - **every year**. This is particularly important if you have clay soil. But if you do have clay soil, avoid the peat moss (it can inhibit drainage in clay) and don't add sand (clay and sand makes concrete!).

An increasing number of dahlia growers are finding that their plants respond well to an entirely organic approach to growing. Rich organic soils make for strong, healthy, insect pest resistant plants.

Dahlias don't like to be wet, especially when first planted (the tubers will rot). Do whatever you can to enable good drainage – raised beds, cover crops in winter, a French drain, or a dry creek bed are possible solutions.

Finally, you may want to fence in your garden if you have deer or munching critters such as groundhogs.

Our courses are written by dahlia enthusiasts, not necessarily scientists or horticulturalists. These enthusiasts are pleased to share their experience and best practices with you. Please keep in mind that there are a variety of opinions in the dahlia community and that different solutions and procedures work in different circumstances and locales. We urge you to participate in a [local society](#) where you will meet great growers with knowledge of growing dahlias in your area...and you'll have fun!